Nature, Consciousness, and Metaphysics in Merleau-Ponty's Early Thought

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La structure du comportement details consciousness-nature relations by navigating between realist and intellectualist alternatives. A phenomenological reading of form guides its attempt to formulate a view that does not reduce consciousness to matter or perceptual structure to a product of mind. I show that this strategy relies on hitherto overlooked idealist commitments. Forms are perceived objects whose intentional structure is intelligibly organized. Having denied that forms are constituted by mind or emergent from matter, Merleau-Ponty likens form-constitution to an ideal process of intentional self-organization. Despite recognizing that Gestalt psychology develops fruitful models of perceptual self-organization, and adopting the transcendental view that form is significant for consciousness, his revisionary interpretation of form outstrips these accounts' ontologies of mind and nature, and is better understood in light of a post-Kantian philosophical heritage. These results cast Merleau-Ponty's relation to the Gestalt, post-Kantian, and phenomenological traditions in new light, challenge naturalizing interpretations of *Structure*, and motivate a rethinking of the status of metaphysics in his early thought.

1. Introduction

La Structure du comportement attempts a first solution to a problem that occupies Merleau-Ponty throughout his career: how best to define "the relations between consciousness and nature" (SC 1/3).[1] *Structure*'s proposal rests on its reading of form (*la forme*) or structure (*la structure*).[2] Like behaviour (*le comportement*), form

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1. All translations of SC are my own.

2. Following Merleau-Ponty, who in turn follows Guillaume (1937/1979) on this point, I use these two terms interchangeably. As a reviewer suggests, however, there is reason to think that

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secures a middle path between competing interpretations of consciousness-nature relations advanced by "contemporaries in France": "a philosophy [. . .] that turns every nature into an objective unity constituted before the mind and sciences that treat organism and consciousness as two orders of reality, and, in their reciprocal relation, as 'effects' and 'causes'" (SC 2/4). To overcome "classical antitheses" between the physiological and mental, one must reject realist views that privilege causal explanation between discrete bits of matter, and intellectualist views on which meaning-making acts secure the intelligibility of nature, organisms, and perceived objects (SC 138/127).

Merleau-Ponty's basic hesitations about these alternatives are well-documented: the first ignores the fundamental role that qualitative conditions play in securing consciousness's connection to nature and intended objects, while the latter overemphasizes subjective contributions.[3] As typically understood, his account of form and behaviour critically extends the findings of Gestalt psychologists (Goldstein, Koffka, Köhler) and is indebted to transcendental accounts of perceptual consciousness.[4] These influences are thought to motivate his view that a "return to perception" and "original experience" will show how meaningful 'wholes' are constituted in matter, life, and mind (SC 236/219–20), provides a "support" for "intellectual analysis," and explains consciousness-nature relations without reproducing the errors of alternative approaches (SC 240–41/224).

However, as I argue, while Gestalt and transcendental traditions supply key building blocks for a theory of form, consciousness, and nature, they fail to countenance form's ideal character and its self-organizing intentional structure, as Merleau-Ponty understands these features (Section 2). His criticisms of Gestalt accounts of nature and idea (Section 3) and of transcendental constitution (Section 4) suggest a commitment to a non-empiricist and non-transcendental view

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Structure's later sections accord a priority to structure over form, especially when Merleau-Ponty's own views about consciousness, nature, or behaviour are presented. Whereas 'form' often refers to objects-for-consciousness (a usage that reflects its transcendental heritage), 'structure' points to a more fundamental ground beyond consciousness. The shift is never officially announced, however, and there are cases where it is not observed (e.g., SC 186/171, 199/184). Even if one grants this contested point, the interpretation advanced below can account for the relevant differences of emphasis. If these are to be admitted, form should be read as the perceptual-intentional counterpart of structure (for further support of their compatibility see, e.g., SC 207/192). In either case, neither term, I will argue, is reducible to consciousness.

    3. See indicatively Rouse (2005) and Geraets (1971: 113).

    4. See Geraets (1971: 12), Spiegelberg (1994: 550), Muller (2017), Sheredos (2017), Kee (2020: 7), see also Geraets (1971: 58–63), Taminiaux (1978), Smyth (2017). Merleau-Ponty's 1933 scholarship application observes that analyses of subject-object relations can profit from studying pathology and that Gestalt psychology and phenomenology are complementary (Merleau-Ponty 1933/1971: 189). He aims to bring phenomenological interpretations to bear on psychological findings, but not to formulate new empirical methods (Merleau-Ponty 1933/1971: 191) or collapse distinctions between empirical-scientific and phenomenological research (see Section 7.3).

of form, consciousness, and nature. Phenomenological description reveals that forms are intentional objects intuitively given as meaningful wholes. Their intelligible structure is neither a product of mental acts nor emergent from matter. Form is a self-organizing synthesis of matter or nature and idea, best understood in what Merleau-Ponty calls "its Hegelian meaning" (SC 227/210). As *Structure*'s analysis of life demonstrates (Section 5), basic Hegelian commitments, when coupled with phenomenological premises, sustain an alternative model of form-constitution and consciousness-nature relations, which promises to capture form's hybrid characteristics without reducing it to matter or mind.

On this interpretation, Merleau-Ponty's account of consciousness-nature and mind-world relations harbours incipient idealist commitments: perceived forms disclose meaningful structures that are open to but obtain independently of consciousness's sense-making activity (Section 6). Perceptual intentionality shows that nature, concrete objects, and reality itself are intelligibly structured. *Structure* attempts to explain this phenomenological datum while resisting versions of material and mental reduction. In the end, it meets the latter goal without fully developing the implications of its accounts of consciousness, nature, and form.

This fresh look at *Structure*'s take on consciousness-nature relations brings its complex argumentative strategy into greater relief, and clarifies Merleau-Ponty's ambivalent stance towards transcendental philosophy and Gestalt psychology. It upsets developmental narratives on which post-*Phenomenology* writings effect a metaphysical turn, offers an opportunity to reassess his early attitude to metaphysics, and motivates a reevaluation of phenomenology's transcendental lineage. If *Structure*'s account of mind-nature relations is orthogonal to standard naturalistic ontologies, these results also cast doubt on the degree to which it supports phenomenological naturalization projects. While commentators have identified important continuities with naturalistic approaches, these only go so far: even unorthodox versions of phenomenological naturalism must reckon with *Structure*'s interpretation of nature, which is better understood as a successor to post-Kantian philosophical currents.

2. Form's Amphibious Status

Structure develops a non-reductive account of matter, life, and mind. It argues that organisms' activity, conscious life, and organism-milieu relations are best understood as meaningful, dynamic responses to environmental conditions. Merleau-Ponty contends that behaviour (roughly, a living being's mode of interaction with its environment) and perceptual activity are irreducible to matter and inadequately captured by physicalist or causal models (SC 102–3/93).

Like any perceived object, "behaviour is a form" (SC 138/127). Forms are (i) meaningful (or "qualitative") (ii) relationally structured wholes (iii) irreducible to their parts. A form "expresses [a] type of unity that [organisms or objects] achieve" (SC 54/50; 221/205–6). This unity is thought to bear an intrinsic meaning. The meaning of form or "behaviour is made [*fait*] of relations" between the parts that make up a given form (SC 138/127).[5]

Some definitions of form suggest that the relation between a form's meaning and its constituent parts is akin to supervenience:

> there is form wherever a system's properties are modified by each change brought to any one of its parts [. . . and where its parts] change while retaining the same relation to one another. (SC 50/47)

> Form, in the sense we have defined it, possesses original properties with respect to those of the parts that can be separated from it. In form, each moment [*moment*] is determined by the unity of the others, and their respective value depends on a state of total equilibrium whose formula is an intrinsic feature of [each] 'form.' (SC 101/91)

Supervenience describes relations of dependence between an *x*-domain and a *y*-domain. Some *x* supervenes on some *y* if there can be no changes in *x* without changes in *y*. Relations between the mental and physical are often understood in these terms: conscious states like pain are thought to supervene on relevant brain states. To adapt *Structure*'s example, a football team's attack is a form because its relations and shape depend on players' intentions, actions, and coordination on a pitch. Changes in these conditions determine the possibility and outcome of an attack (SC 182–83/168–69).

The concept of supervenience (or founding, a phenomenological variant) helpfully captures form's sensitivity to changes in constituent conditions. But formal relations are not necessarily supervenience relations. For an *x*-domain to supervene on a *y*-domain, some ordered totality or "state of total equilibrium" in the *y*-domain must obtain. Higher-order relations presuppose ordered lower-level relations (in an attack, these include players' positions on the pitch, ball possession, etc.). Formal relations need not be vertical or top-down, as in supervenience, but can also be lateral.

This points to another important feature: (iv) forms are "dialectical moments" (SC 153/142). Alternatively, formal "relations [are] not mechanical, but dialectical" (SC 174/160). Formal relations are dynamic and variously realizable. The shape and outcome of an attack changes as players' positions on a pitch change.

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5. See Bannon (2011: 345) for more on relations in Merleau-Ponty.

A state of equilibrium achieved by an organism is a unity of relations and "conditions that are themselves dynamic" (SC 157/145). In stimulus-response relations, "physical stimuli act upon the organism only by eliciting a global response which will vary qualitatively when the stimuli vary quantitatively" (SC 174/161). A stimulus is a general relation, but how it solicits responses from an organism differs depending on the organism's interactions with local conditions.

Consistent with *Structure*'s anti-partitive and anti-reductive approach, dialectical relations are governed by "circular causality" and "reciprocal inclusion" (SC 13/15, 161/148). Mechanical relations are unidirectional and correspond to efficient causality (SC 174/160–61). Dialectical relations are non-linear and sustain co-determination or co-constitution between organism/milieu or subject/object. This generalizes to the inter-formal level: "the existence of such a structure in the world is but the intersection of a multitude of relations--which it is true refer to other structural conditions" (SC 153/142, 228–29/211–12).

These features are fairly well-known, and in *Structure*'s first Part, they serve arguments that laws of nature cannot be isolated from the data they explain, and that qualitative conditions obtain in physiological structures and animal behaviour.[6] It is typically thought that these tenets lead Merleau-Ponty to supplement form's anti-reductive, holistic, and qualitative features, which he inherits from Gestalt psychology, with a transcendental theory of perception (I discuss both traditions below). These resources are thought to inform his answer to the important question of what "*constitutes* order instead of undergoing it" (SC 33/33). If "form is not a physical reality, but an object of perception", then the meanings encountered in behaviour and perception can be said to obtain for and to originate from human consciousness (SC 155/143).

However, other important features of form suggest an alternative interpretation. In addition to (i)–(iv), forms (v) are likened to ideas or ideal unities, and (vi) are said to be self-organizing or auto-constitutive:

> the organism that biological analysis occupies itself with is an ideal unity [*une unité idéale*]. [. . .] The structures one reaches here are neither [. . .] supplementary causes that direct fragmentary phenomena, nor simple names for designating them, but rather ideas [*des idées*] in which structures participate without containing those ideas within them [*sans les contenir en eux*]. (SC 165/152)

An organism is a living or "vital" form, and vital forms "participate" in ideas. This suggests that forms bear some ideal content. Another remark confirms this

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6. See Rouse's observation that a law is not an "object existing in itself but must be disclosed to a perceiving consciousness" (2005: 265–66).

and describes form as the "spatio-temporal unfolding of certain ideal unities [*le déploiement temporel et spatial de certaines unites idéales*]" (SC 172/159).

Structure's final Part calls attention to the deeper import of its appeal to form:

> What is profound in the [concept of the] 'Gestalt' that we began with is not the notion of signification but that of *structure*, the joining of an idea and an existence indistinguishable from one another, the contingent arrangement by which materials [*les matériaux*] before us begin to take on a sense [*sens*], intelligibility in its nascent state [*l'intelligibilité a l'état naissant*]. (SC 223/206–7)

While it is widely recognized that forms are intentional objects, their phenomenal content also bears an immanent idea (v). This passage suggests that by "idea," Merleau-Ponty understands a "sense" (*sens*) or meaning immanent in a form. An idea lends meaning or "intelligibility" to a perceived object and is coextensive with or "indistinguishable from" it. Form is also defined as an auto-constitutive or "spontaneous organization [*organisation spontanée*] of the phenomenal field" (vi): the passage above suggests that forms integrate the various "materials" that constitute an object, event, or relation (e.g., an organism's cells, or an object's properties) independently of subjective meaning-making acts (Merleau-Ponty 1933/1971: 193; cf. Guillaume 1937/1979: 237). Hence, while meaningful for consciousness, descriptions of formal self-organization do not suggest that consciousness organizes forms' or intentional objects' intelligible structure or meaningful appearance. The latter unfolds "before us" and obtains prior to subjective ascriptions or conceptual constructions (*des significations*). In Sections 4 and 6, I offer more evidence in support of this claim.

For now, note that these latter features lend form an amphibious intentional and metaphysical status. Forms "exist 'in' the physical world" but are irreducible to matter. They are better understood as a "synthesis of matter and idea" (SC 147/137) or a "unity" of "nature and idea" (SC 227/210). If *Structure*'s account of form, nature, and consciousness is a successor to either Gestalt or transcendental accounts, then these approaches should be able to accommodate two basic premises: first, that nature can be joined with an idea; and second, that form's ideal unity is not constituted by consciousness, even if form is also an intended object. Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of Gestalt and transcendental accounts, I show in Sections 3–4, demonstrate that these frameworks fall short on both counts. In Sections 5–6, I explore his response to these impasses. To anticipate: *Structure* concludes that a "Hegelian" reading of form offers a more promising model for integrating features (i)–(vi):

> Our analyses, then, direct us to the ideality of the body [*l'idealité du corps*], but it was a question of an idea that proffers itself [*se profère*] and is even formed [*se fait*] in the chance [*le hazard*] of existence. The concept of the *Gestalt* naturally led us back to its Hegelian meaning, that is, to the concept before it has become consciousness of self. Nature, we said, is the exterior [*l'extérieur*] of a concept. (SC 227/210)

A Hegelian view of form, consciousness, and nature, the passage suggests, better accounts for form's ideal (v) and auto-constitutive characteristics (vi), sustains a non-reductive view of nature, and offers an alternative construal of nature-consciousness continuity. This model is closer to the non-empiricist view of nature and the non-intellectualist view of consciousness that Merleau-Ponty attempts to articulate in this early text. To properly grasp his motivations for defending this hybrid view, we must first clarify what he rejects and retains from Gestalt and transcendental accounts, and why he attempts a novel synthesis between available interpretations of form.

3. Nature Between Matter and Idea

Gestalt psychology's challenge to partitive, reductive, and causal analysis makes it an ally in *Structure*'s effort to redefine perceptual consciousness and organism-environment relations.[7] The claim that perceptual activity engages structured patterns or complex forms irreducible to their parts is arguably the central insight emerging from the Berlin school of experimental psychology. Reflecting on his research in 1946, Merleau-Ponty praises Gestalt theory for demonstrating that organized, meaningful forms already obtain in the sensible and in matter, a result already celebrated in *Structure* (PrP 11–12). The organic foregrounding of a figure against a background (or the phenomenon of good form) is a classic example of this mode of organization (SC 101/92). Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty adopts Köhler and Goldstein's view that forms are meaningful "descriptive properties of certain natural wholes" (SC 54/51).

Goldstein's extension of holistic psychological methods to biology is especially relevant here. He argues that an organism's relation to its milieu pre-

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7. In addition to Köhler and Goldstein, *Structure*'s reconstruction of Gestalt theory relies on Guillaume's *La psychologie de la forme* (1937/1979). Guillaume argues that form resists partitive analysis (Guillaume 1937/1979: 18), is a self-organizing whole irreducible to its parts, and overcomes classical mind-matter dualism (1937/1979: 223–26). Despite agreeing on these points, Merleau-Ponty will reject what he sees as Guillaume's physicalist interpretation of form, which neglects its dialectical character (cf. 1937/1979: 233–34).

supposes "significative" values, which are irreducible to causal relations and emerge organically in behaviour (SC 155/143). For example, a hungry animal recognizes another animal as prey, rather than as merely alive or in motion, and an organism achieves a state of equilibrium in response to changes in external conditions. These cases suggest that, like perception, organic life is structured by irreducibly ordered unities and is not a mere aggregate of discrete parts. They also suggest that organism-environment relations are fundamentally dynamic and can be described qualitatively.

Despite praising its powerful arguments against realism and behaviourism, Merleau-Ponty notes that Gestalt psychology encounters significant limits, due mainly to its ontology of form and nature (SC 50/47, 11/13, 133/122).[8] While Gestaltists define form as a higher-order significative unity, they accept that formal relations are analyzable into constituent material parts: "When one says that there are physical forms, the proposition is equivocal. [. . .] in speaking of physical forms, Gestalt theory understands that one can locate these structures *in* nature taken in-itself, from which mind can be constituted" (SC 151/140). Nature 'in itself' refers to a classical view on which nature is constituted by discrete physical parts (capable of sustaining higher-order qualitative states or supervenience relations). Gestalt theorists rightly argue that vital, behavioural, and perceptual forms are meaningful. But their analyses of nature, Merleau-Ponty maintains, lack a corresponding account of the physical that explains how meaning can flow from matter. On these views, matter is defined in physiological or causal terms, and lacks the basic ingredient for endogenous meaning-making, namely, the idea (SC 99/1, 237/88). For Merleau-Ponty, meaning cannot be reduced to or constituted out of the physical order so understood.[9] Gestalt arguments for form's descriptive, holistic, and irreducible character ultimately commit a category mistake, since qualitative terms express "relationships conceived by our mind" (SC 52/49). Forms are "a unity of meaning [*sens*] that expresses itself in juxtaposed parts", and their "relations [*rapports*]" ultimately "owe nothing to the materiality of the terms they unite" (SC 96/86–88). The claim that forms are grasped "only by their meaning" (SC 241/224) lends prima facie support to the view that form is constituted by consciousness; I return to this below.

Two important claims emerge from Merleau-Ponty's critique of the Gestalt approach: form is irreducible to matter; and, while forms are immanent in perception or nature, nature need not be defined solely in material or physical terms. Recall that biological objects ("vital forms") are also "ideal unities" (SC 165/152);

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8. See Muller (2021) for an excellent overview of Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of Gestalt accounts (SC 99/1, 237/88, 153/142).

9. See Thompson (2007: 85–86, 159). Merleau-Ponty concedes that physicalistic analyses of form are possible but not promising (SC 164/151). Later critiques of Gestalt psychology repeat these hesitations (PrP 23–24).

form is also idea (Section 2, v). Another remark observes that "*nature*" and intentional "objects" are defined by "an idea in which they participate, a meaning realized within them" (*par une idée à laquelle ils participent, une signification qui se réalise en eux*) (SC 218/202).

How should we understand talk of idea or ideal unity? Given Merleau-Ponty's liberal use of Goldstein, one might think that 'idea' refers to concepts that *Der Aufbau des Organismus* argues biologists construct to understand life (SC 165/152, 179/165).[10] Consistent with his non-reductive holistic method, for Goldstein "nature, [. . .] idea, picture, or conception of the organism" refer to the "essentials for the realization of adequacy between the organism and its environment" (Goldstein 1995: 308, 314–15).[11] 'Adequacy' and 'equilibrium' are qualitative terms, and a descriptive biology is thought to better grasp an organism's attempt to realize a whole and future state through what Goldstein characterizes as progressive and dynamic vital processes.

For Goldstein, the "idea" that articulates qualitative relations of adequacy between organism and environment has no "metaphysical" import but puts semantic flesh on bare empirical facts (1995: 307–8). While he claims that vital equilibrium relies on a logic of "self-organization" (1995: 286–89), the "reason in knowledge" that clarifies part-whole relations is a product of biologists' "creative activity", a process he likens to Goethe's *Schau* (1995: 306–7). A non-reductive biology fits qualitative terms to biological phenomena, but the former are imaginative inventions that translate physical processes, not real features of nature (Smyth 2017: 136).

Merleau-Ponty accepts that qualitative terms disclose an organism's descriptive characteristics (SC 166/153). Recall, however, that ideas are "indistinguishable" from organisms' real "existence" (SC 223/206–7). By contrast, Gestalt theory defines "nature" in terms of "physical structures" (SC 146–47/136). On this account, form is ultimately "physical" (Guillaume 1937/1979: 24–25). As the Introduction to *Structure's* Part III observes, a materialist ontology prevents Gestaltists from availing themselves of the "most important consequences" of their descriptions of life, pathology, and perception (SC 143–47/133–37).

Having rejected views of nature as a collection of discrete physical entities or a series of causally-bound events (*partes extra partes*) (SC 1/3), *Structure* concludes that organisms are ultimately defined by a meaning immanent to them. Unlike for Goldstein and other Gestaltists, ideas are real features of nature, form, and behaviour, not mere heuristic posits for the study of life. As I will argue (Sections 5, 7), these claims are best grasped as a phenomenological redefinition of nature rather than a denial of its biochemical structure or empirical character: from the

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10. For Goldstein's influence on Merleau-Ponty see Geraets (1971: 40–61, 73), Smyth (2017).
11. For Goldstein's holism see Goldstein (1995: 361); for the idea see (1995: 306, 385).

first-person, organisms do not appear as matter "in itself" but as meaningful "phenomena endowed [*doués*] with their own structure" (SC 217/201). On the face of it, these claims sound idealistic and raise broader questions about the meaning of idealism. I address these in Section 4.2 and Section 6. For now, note that these considerations lead Merleau-Ponty to conclude that Gestalt-psychological resources make only partial contributions to *Structure*'s positive account of form and nature.

4. Form as Object of Consciousness

I now want to consider a second interpretive strategy for explaining form: the view that form depends on consciousness. We just saw that form's descriptive and meaningful features make it irreducible to matter. In conjunction with Merleau-Ponty's rejection of causal realism and physicalism, some commentators take this as evidence for the transcendental thesis that form is constituted by consciousness. For Muller, these arguments reveal a commitment to an "explanatorily basic [. . .] general structure—the orientation toward meaning—that is discovered only in the distinctively human order" (2021: 2269). If meaning needs consciousness, as Merleau-Ponty sometimes suggests it does, then the features of form considered above can be understood to depend on "transcendental" conditions of possibility. Along these lines, Taminiaux suggests that "The Gestalt presupposes perceptual consciousness as its transcendental condition" (1978: 38–39; see also Geraets 1971).

Needless to say, Merleau-Ponty adopts many insights from the transcendental tradition. However, in his view, transcendental interpretations of form-constitution fall short of the mark, chiefly because they cannot countenance form's auto-constitutive structure: while form is a perceptual object, its meaning and mode of organization is not a product of consciousness's constitutive activity. To understand why he draws this conclusion, we need a clearer picture of his early interpretation of transcendental philosophy.

4.1. The Contours of Transcendental Thought

Despite also identifying phenomenological strains, *Structure* typically associates critical or transcendental views with Kantian-inspired positions.[12] Brunschvicg's

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12. While Merleau-Ponty's scholarship application refers to *Ideen*, *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl's studies of time-consciousness, and works by Fink, Levinas, Héring, G. Gurvitsch, and A. Gurwitsch, phenomenological versions of the transcendental are less frequently discussed than Kantian varieties.

Kant-interpretation is of particular influence.[13] *Structure* often mixes sub-commitments from these strains and does not develop a unified and systematic interpretation of transcendental idealism. However, it offers some instructive definitions: "Transcendental idealism" makes "subject and object inseparable correlates" while sustaining "the validity of a perceptual experience whereby the world appears in person but nevertheless as distinct from the subject" (SC 215/199); defines "all conceivable reality as an object of consciousness" (SC 217/201); and defends a view "of consciousness as constituting the universe before it and grasping objects themselves [*les objets mêmes*] in an indubitable external experience" (SC 232/215). An exhaustive discussion is not possible here, but I will address the relevant parts of each claim in turn.

Transcendental idealism admits a necessary correlation between mind and world. While Kant and Husserl offer different interpretations of correlation, both agree that the objects of conscious experience exist independently of mind. However, they argue that objects' modes of (re-)presentation necessarily depend on our cognitive and perceptual structures. There is no meaningful conscious experience and no substantive knowledge of the world without input from it. But Kant and Husserl maintain that the structure of experience, that is, how input from the world meaningfully appears to the mind or senses, is determined by the structures of consciousness.

This brings us to the two latter points above. All objects are objects of consciousness: anything conceivable, imaginable, or perceptible necessarily implies a subject who adopts some intentional stance. Transcendental idealists argue that this lends subjectivity a constitutive privilege. Consciousness enjoys a constitutive function because its ability to, for example, order appearances under concepts, or intend objects under a specific intentional guise, constrains and ultimately forms those objects' meaningful modes of appearance. While there is no mind without a world, the shape of consciousness-world relations is moulded by mental activity.

Merleau-Ponty recognizes some definitive advantages to this approach. He readily embraces subject-world correlation. Second, he accepts Kant's view, later defended by Husserl, that consciousness's meaning-making activity is irreducible to material conditions or processes. In his view, the first *Critique* compellingly shows that conditions for the possibility of experience (inner sense, the "ideality of space") lie outside causal determination (SC 102/91–93; see also SC 211/196, 172/159, 185–86/171). By stressing the meaningful character of conscious experience, transcendental approaches counter reductive realist accounts of thought and perception. Third, Merleau-Ponty thinks this paves the way for a

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13. Merleau-Ponty reports that in his youth "[t]he most important philosophical thought of the time in France was that of Léon Brunschvicg" (PD 249–50).

fruitful, non-reductive philosophy of nature. Phenomenology unearths a view of nature "anterior . . . to the Nature of the sciences" and shows that the "natural attitude" and empirical science fail to grasp "primordial Nature, that pre-objective sensible field" (SC 180 Footnote/244–45 Endnote 82). Phenomenology does not presuppose a scientific image of nature and accompanying theoretical commitments (e.g., efficient causal explanation). By questioning the validity of scientific methods, transcendental reflection and the phenomenological reduction (as developed by Husserl or Fink) disclose a sphere of nature lived in the first-person (SC 222/206, 236 Footnote/222 Endnote 56).

These basic points of convergence suggest that commentators are right to identify *Structure*'s continuities with transcendental thought. But Merleau-Ponty thinks their phenomenological appropriation is best served outside the metaphysical and epistemological borders of transcendental idealism. That there is convergence with the "critical idea" and the "transcendental attitude" is "the first conclusion we have to draw [. . . but] not the only one" (SC 222/206). A central limitation of transcendental approaches is their interpretation of the constitutive dependence of world on mind.

Merleau-Ponty criticizes transcendental views of constitution, including perceptual constitution, for being too "intellectualist" (SC 217/201, 187/173, 202/187). This choice of terminology suggests an attempt to distance himself from the intellectualism exemplified by Brunschvicg's Kant-interpretation. Brunschvicg's critical idealism emphasizes subjective sense-making conditions, especially judgmental acts. *La modalité du jugement* holds that judgment is the primitive operation of mind (*l'ésprit*). Judgment is a constitutive, that is, creative or constructive operation. It shapes the empirical givenness of objects by bringing concepts (especially scientific ones, which for Brunschvicg vary across historical time) to bear on appearances (Brunschvicg 1964: 26–27; 1922: 466–68). This approach persists in the interpretation of Kant offered in *Le progrès de la conscience*, which identifies the transcendental unity of apperception as a central Kantian commitment (Brunschvicg 1927: 306–7). The transcendental subject is a constitutive agent par excellence, and Brunschvicg highlights passages from Kant showing that the unity of representations rests on a persisting subjective capacity to engage in synthetic or unificatory activity (1927: 295–352).

Differences between Kant and Brunschvicg are non-negligible.[14] However, on these points, Brunschvicg's reading finds textual support. For Kant, the unity and form of the manifold is secured by "an act of the of the spontaneity of the power of representation", that is, through the understanding's "**synthesis**" and "self-activity" (B130). Synthetic activity is the sine qua non for the unity of expe-

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14. Brunschvicg criticizes Kant for surrendering the basic judgmental principle of critical thought for fixed Aristotelian categories (Brunschvicg 1964: Section V; Brunschvicg 1922: 550).

rience and perceived objects: "without this synthesis, the manifold would **not** be united in one consciousness" and an object could not "**become an object for me**" (B138; see also A77/B103).

This approach to empirical unity, filtered through Brunschvicg's reading of constitution qua judgment, leads Merleau-Ponty to conclude that transcendental constitution is an abstract mental activity that quite literally gives form to reality (see B34/A20, A89/B121–22). He readily accepts that form is an intentional "object of perception" (SC 155/143). The concept "is borrowed, in the final analysis, from the perceived world" (SC 207/192). However, while meaningful for consciousness, form is not constituted by it, in the senses indicated above. By ignoring its fundamentally auto-constitutive intentional structure (Section 2, vi), transcendental accounts misdescribe form as a mere subjective "judgment" (SC 216–17/201). This threatens to reduce "the thing in its thickness [*épaisseur*] to a net of significations" or a mental construct (SC 239/223). These accounts get the order of constitutive priority backwards: transcendental consciousness "discover[s] intellectual signification [*signification*] in concrete structure" without sufficiently attending to constitutive processes already at work in the phenomenal field (SC 241/224).[15] But consciousness-world relations are "[inconceivable] without reference to the phenomenal field and its laws of internal equilibrium" (SC 138/127–28). These criticisms may not do justice to other phenomenological strains in Kant, but they show that as far as form-constitution is concerned, transcendental approaches wrongly assume that form does not obtain independently of subjective form-giving activity (SC 217/200–201).[16]

4.2. Towards a Redefinition of Transcendental Philosophy

Given that he rejects the "Kantian" apparatus of "representation," "intellection," and "object", how should we understand Merleau-Ponty's attempt "to define transcendental philosophy anew so that it may be integrated with the phenomenon of the real [*jusq'au le phénomène du réel*]"? (SC 241/224). A suggestive remark observes that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* contains "essential indications concerning the problems" treated in *Structure* (SC 223 Footnote 1/248 Endnote 41). The significance of the third *Critique*, which departs from intellectualism and contributes something new to transcendental philosophy, lies in its account of idea

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15. While *Structure* sometimes uses 'idea' to describe abstract or propositional meanings (*la signification*), Merleau-Ponty denies that ideas in his positive sense refer to "relations [. . .] intrinsic to thought" alone (SC 138/127, 241/224). This reflects a view of consciousness as "fabric [*tissu*] of ideal significations" (SC 232/215).

16. See Matherne's (2016) argument that a phenomenological reading of Kant reveals *Phénoménologie*'s reliance on Kant's schematism.

and nature. Kant sketches a view on which nature and organisms appear as if structured by the "idea" of self-organization and animated by self-directed natural purposes (5:370–76; A318/B374). A key motivation behind this suggestion is the apparent inability of mechanistic explanation to account for the intricate organization found in nature, for example, in a bird's structure, which seems to bear the marks of order or art (5:360). Beyond mechanism, nature can be studied in accordance with the "supersensible" idea of self-organization or natural teleology (5:363, 5:373–76). Unlike artefacts or artworks, an organism "organizes itself" and is animated by "internal" self-generating principles irreducible to material properties (5:374). Instead of matter, "An idea has to ground the possibility of the product of nature" (5:377).

The deeper payoff of Merleau-Ponty's critiques of Gestalt psychology and transcendental thought comes into relief here. Those critiques showed that a theory of form must resist its reduction to mind or matter, capture its auto-constitutive intentional status, and redefine nature in a way consistent with form's ideality. Unlike Kant, Merleau-Ponty does not analyze the totality of nature under the idea of teleological organization and does not claim that self-organization should be understood as harmonious unity of cause and effect (as in final causality) (SC 167–68/154). However, he develops a phenomenological counterpart to Kant's suggestion about organic self-organization and uses it to explain form's intended structure.[17] Objects in matter, life, and mind, Merleau-Ponty will argue, are necessarily given with "the original structure of a phenomenon [*la structure originale d'un phénomène*]" (SC 231/214). Intuitive evidence shows that intentional meaning is formed (*se fait*) before us: form's "original structure" is not forged by subjective activity (SC 235/219). Merleau-Ponty's critique of transcendental constitution leads him to deny that consciousness is "a universal function organizing experience" (SC 186/172). For "the possession of a representation or the exercise of a judgment, is not coextensive with the life of consciousness" (SC 187/173). But because phenomena are qualitative or meaningful, formal self-organization cannot be explained using more proximate Gestalt-perceptual models, since these presuppose a materialistic ontology.

The promise of the (post-)Kantian model of self-organization lies in its distinctive ideal status, which resists the reduction of form to matter, while making way for an alternative philosophy of nature.[18] As his positive descriptions

17. Huneman (2006) argues for the influence of Kant's third *Critique* on Bergson and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies of nature and identifies Schelling as the decisive link. But Merleau-Ponty is already grappling with these themes in their Hegelian guises before his later more well-known engagement with Schelling.

18. Waldenfels identifies Merleau-Ponty's claims that form results from "a process [. . .] of self-organization" and that it lies somewhere between idea and thing as inheritances from Gestalt psychology (1980: 23). While this estimation captures one important influence, it overlooks the

of nature show, Merleau-Ponty goes one step beyond Kant: like Schelling and Hegel, he affirms that self-organizing structures really obtain in nature and perception; intuition belies a merely heuristic reading of self-organization. He solves the problem of how form is constituted for consciousness without being constituted by it by appealing to a "Hegelian" interpretation of form, on which finite objects and organisms bear immanent ideas or concepts that organize them and make them intelligible to mind. Consciousness will be integrated with the real through a revisionary and syncretic phenomenological account that embraces consciousness-world correlation while attributing a subject-independent intelligibility to reality. While the Hegelian model of organic unity and form is not without its limitations, in Merleau-Ponty's eyes, it makes significant headway in overcoming longstanding divisions between mind and nature (SC 197/182).

5. The Intelligibility of Life

By clarifying Merleau-Ponty's hesitations about Gestalt and transcendental accounts, the findings above show that a sophisticated view of nature-consciousness relations must prevent form's reduction to mind or matter, account for ideality or meaning with nature, while also satisfying characteristics (i)–(vi). Merleau-Ponty suggests that Hegel's approach, on which "Nature . . . is the exterior of a concept", better serves these aims (SC 227/210). Below I show how he appropriates Hegelian tenets to explain life's (or vital forms') intelligibility. This analysis bridges *Structure*'s account of physical and perceptual form and showcases its hybrid approach to consciousness and nature. It suggests that basic idealist theses aid phenomenological descriptions of life's intelligibility to mind, while steering clear of realist, materialist, and intellectualist alternatives. After clarifying relevant background, I turn to the details.

5.1. Hegel on Nature and Idea

Merleau-Ponty finds Hegel's claim that the concept is the interior of nature in a contemporaneous article by Hyppolite, cited variously in *Structure*.[19] Hyppolite's essay emerges amid a renaissance of French interest in Hegel, following the largely dismissive reception by philosophers like Renouvier and Brunschvicg (whose lectures on the history of philosophy at the ENS Merleau-Ponty

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significant metaphysical differences between the two approaches, and ignores Merleau-Ponty's debts to Hegel.

    19. Hyppolite (1938: 47, 47 Footnote 2); see also SC 175/161–62.

attended). Commentators usually identify Kojève's lectures as the most important locus of Hegelian influence on Merleau-Ponty's early thought.[20] While there are some signs of this, the relevant claims for his formulation of idea-nature-consciousness continuity are supplied by the review of Hegel's view of mind-nature relations in Hyppolite's article. While this link has been noted, the extent of Merleau-Ponty's early appropriation of related Hegelian themes remains unexamined.[21]

Hyppolite emphasizes the 'spiritual' dimension of Hegel's philosophy of life while outlining basic features of his approach to nature and organic unity. He observes that for Hegel, life is a "whole" that develops itself (1938: 55), highlights the claim that "nature [is] an inferior moment of the Idea" (1938: 47), and argues that Hegel privileges the categories of 'relation' and 'infinity' in his philosophy of life. Hegel's view that nature is permeated by ideal and self-organizing principles critically develops Kant and Schelling's interpretations of natural teleology. Hegel praises *Critique of Judgment*'s account of the idea but argues that Kant's interpretation is too subject-centric (1991b: §55). Following Schelling, he contends that organisms evidence the "*actuality*" or constitutive import of natural self-organization. As the *Encyclopedia Philosophy of Mind* puts it, "philosophical thinking knows that nature is idealized not merely by us [. . .] but that the eternal Idea immanent in nature or, [. . .] the implicit mind at work in the interior of nature itself effects idealization" (Hegel 2007: §381Z; see also Hegel 1991b: §18). Hegel defines nature in non-materialistic terms, as a rational domain bearing ideal content. The claim that nature contains mind, which proves important for Merleau-Ponty, entails that nature is permeated by intelligible, organized forms, graspable by but not originating in consciousness.[22]

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20. See Kleinberg (2005: 105–9). This influence seems clear in remarks about *le travail* (SC 176/162). Kojève's account of *le réel* is also of relevance (2017: 257–58, 523 ff.). However, the key Kojèvian themes of negativity (understood as a motor of transformation), time, recognition, and history do not inform *Structure*'s analytical framework or its definitions of nature and consciousness. Kleinberg reads remarks about Hegel's view of nature and concept as references to Kojève's view of dialectic, but there is direct evidence of Hyppolite's influence. While proximate evaluations figure in Kojève's *Introduction* (2017: 155–59), Merleau-Ponty does not index the meaning of nature to 'transcendent' activity and does not "[follow] Kojève in positing a dualistic ontology that distinguishes between the human world and the natural world" (Kleinberg 2005: 105). He rejects dualistic frameworks on which mind and nature are essentially different in kind, and instead argues that mind emerges from nature or "*comes into the world*" (SC 225/209). Other influences cannot be excluded, but I have highlighted the Hyppolite connection because it presents a documented avenue of Hegelian influence at this stage of Merleau-Ponty's career.

21. See Morris (2004: 99).

22. While for Hegel the 'idea' is a more realized form of the 'concept,' for our purposes we can treat these terms and their variants as roughly equivalent (for one statement of continuity see 1991: §213). Merleau-Ponty's use of 'idea' is typically closer to what Hegel identifies using the term 'concept,' namely, a concrete or immanent unity of meaning (or a universal). These differences in usage do not detract from the deeper point of continuity, namely, that for both thinkers, mind-

Hyppolite detects an underlying connection between relation, form, and life in Hegel: the idea is first instantiated in living organisms, which exhibit self-referential or self-organizing features and develop according to an immanent principle (1938: 47, 60). On Hyppolite's reading, a "living form" (*une forme vivante*) and "distinct structure" (*une structure distincte*) defines any organic unity (1938: 52). The "immanent totality" or form in an organism is an ideal principle instantiated in a living being (1938: 51). For Hegel, organisms are defined by an "*ideal* unity" within them (2004: §252C). The idea is the "reason within an object", individuates it as a specific kind of thing, delimits the scope of its development and its relationship to other entities (1991a: §2). Hegel adopts a holistic view of organisms and finite objects, on which "the Concept is what truly comes first, and things are what they are through the activity of the Concept that dwells in them" (1991b: §163Z2).[23] Objects enjoy an "absolute unity" prior to "the subjective activity of self-consciousness" (1991b: §42Z1; 2010: 12.20–21).

For Hyppolite, Hegel's view of the life cycle offers an example of nature's conceptual structure. In organic growth, "universal and individual penetrate one another", a process that "translates itself by the logical idea of the power of the negative" and the category of "infinity" (Hyppolite 1938: 54, 50).[24] Organic growth or sexual maturation show that life is a progressive and immanent development or a "transcending of differences" guided by "the power of the absolute negative" or the "negation of the negation." These conditions are ideal: ideality is an irreducible element of nature and individuates forms of life.[25]

Hegel's idealism offers an alternative to subject-centric versions, considered in Section 4. It combines a transcendental emphasis on self-consciousness with the claim that reality is robustly conceptually determined independently of our mental activity. On one interpretation, Hegel secures finite minds' place in the world while denying consciousness the constructive role it enjoys in Kant, Fichte, or Husserl. This requires an overcoming of divisions between concept/intuition, universal/concrete, and nature/mind, and an extension of ideality into the world.

Merleau-Ponty's use of these sources is selective and serves his own goals. *Structure* anticipates later rejections of the rigidly teleological approach of Hegel's philosophy of nature and history, the pretensions of absolute reason, and intellectualist readings of the idea.[26] Nevertheless, he embraces Hegel's views that organisms bear an immanent idea (or universal), are structured by dynamic,

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like phenomena are immanent in nature. Merleau-Ponty embraces this claim despite rejecting the more expansive and speculative character of the idea in Hegel.

23. For Hegel's holism see Stern (1990).

24. On the latter see Houlgate (2006: 423–27).

25. See Stone (2005: ch. 2).

26. While he contrasts higher and lower forms, Merleau-Ponty rejects the necessitarian bent in Hegel's claim that natural forms develop according to a law-like progression (Hegel 2004: §249–50).

ideal conditions, and that forms are not mental products but real features of nature and perceived objects (1991b: §42Z1). The approach just sketched comes closer to *Structure*'s desiderata for a theory of form (§2): it holds that forms are meaningful, irreducible, and dialectically structured wholes (i–iv) and construes formal self-organization as an ideal process (v–vi). Hyppolite's description of organic structure suggests that a post-Hegelian view of formal self-organization can be married with a non-intellectualist view of perceptual consciousness and a non-reductive view of nature. This offers a promising strategy for articulating the synthesis between concrete objects and ideal meanings that Merleau-Ponty thinks is fundamental to nature (Section 3), and in a way consistent with his critique of transcendental constitution (Section 4).

Merleau-Ponty's early attitude to Hegel diverges from an interpretive tendency in early 20th century French thought, represented by Brunschvicg, Boutroux, and Renouvier, which reads Hegel as an all-encompassing rationalist whose speculative constructions conflict with scientific method and misconstrue nature.[27] His view that concept and form are irreducible to their 'spiritual' meaning also pushes beyond the human-centric or existential orientation of Koyré, Kojève, and the early Hyppolite, with whom he is often associated.[28] An eclectic mix of idealist metaphysical commitments helps him critically redefine the correlation between subjectivity and objectivity and develop a novel interpretation of consciousness-nature relations.

5.2. Perceiving Life

I now want to show how the tenets above inform *Structure*'s account of life. This analysis occupies a transitional role in its argument. It shows that descriptive methods used to understand reflex or stimulus also clarify nature and ultimately perception. As in analyses of behaviour, Merleau-Ponty suspends rival interpretive strategies and studies vital forms in their perceived "originality" (SC 167/154). He supplements descriptions of intuitive evidence with an account of formal self-organization or "ideal unity", which explains the former's structure (SC 165/152). This account builds on results from Sections 3–4, which suggest the possibility of reconciling descriptions of perceptual consciousness with non-classical views of 'pre-objective' nature.

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27. See Boutroux (1926: 104). Merleau-Ponty is closer to Meyerson's *De l'explication dans les sciences*, which distinguishes Hegel's method from more reductive explanatory approaches (Meyerson 1927: 53–54).

28. Koyré reads Hegel's philosophy of nature as "phenomenology" (1935: 280) but assumes that the 'concept' derives from the "activity of understanding" (1935: 281).

Despite non-trivial differences, neither the "life of the organism" nor the "life of consciousness" is "a collection of events external to one another" (SC 84/75–76). Like consciousness, "the organism" is not "a real product of external nature" (SC 172/159). A study of life discloses "a unity of signification [. . .] given in perception with [. . .] original characteristics [. . .]". Before becoming a variable, function, or law, an organism is a "whole" "significant for a consciousness that knows it, not a thing resting in-itself [*en soi*]" or a discrete physical entity (SC 172/159).

This reflects the important methodological assumption that intuition yields "original" evidence about life:

> Nothing justifies postulating that the vital dialectic can be integrally translated in physico-chemical relations and reduced to the condition of an anthropomorphic appearance. [. . .] The meaning and value of vital processes that science . . .is obliged to take up, are really attributes of the *perceived* organism, but they are not extrinsic denominations with respect to the true [*vrai*] organism: for the true organism, which science considers, is really the concrete totality [*la totalité concrète*] of the perceived organism, which bears all the correlations that analysis discovers in it, but which is not decomposable into those correlations. (SC 169/156)

Mechanism, finalism, or reductive explanation lack descriptive power and mischaracterize the organism's ontological status when translating perceptual data into empirical models. If we suspend naturalistic assumptions, an organism is given to consciousness as a "living body" (*un corps vivant*), not a physicochemical complex (SC 169/156).[29] "Vital acts *have* a meaning [*sens*]" from the first-person (SC 172/159). For example, hunting manifests a need for self-preservation, and "the act of walking towards a goal, of taking and eating bait, of jumping over or evading an obstacle" suggest meaningful goal-directed activity (SC 170/157). Empirical models variously interpret elementary meanings that are first perceptually encountered.

Merleau-Ponty goes beyond polemical claims that life-phenomena "cannot be understood in the language of anatomy" or that "science[s] of life can only be constructed with concepts . . . borrowed from our experience of life [*du vivant*]" (SC 161/149). He contends that intuitive data are "assimilable to a physical structure" *because* life "is organized in a way" that sustains diverse descriptions and representations (SC 163/150). His view of behaviour underlies this claim: "each organism, in the presence of a given milieu, has its optimal conditions of activity and its proper manner of realizing equilibrium; and the internal determinants

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29. For similar arguments in Husserl see Hua 6:22, 6:108.

of this equilibrium are not given by a plurality of vectors, but by a general attitude toward the world" (SC 161/148). Activities like hunting are dynamic interactions with an environment, require an estimation of its putative limits and affordances, and presuppose complex intentional processes. The "relations of the organic individual and its milieu are truly dialectical relations [*rapports dialectiques*]" irreducible to causality or stimulus-response structures (SC 161/148).

The claims that living forms are perceptually given and that "structure is an object of consciousness" raise worries about anthropomorphism (SC 157/145), which I return to. For now, note that Merleau-Ponty makes a crucial move at this juncture, and supplements phenomenological descriptions of life with the following qualification:

> **[1]** "The mind [*L'ésprit*] of nature is a hidden mind. It is not produced from the form of mind itself; it is only mind for the mind which knows it: it is mind in itself, but not for itself." In reality, then, we have already introduced consciousness, and what we referred to using the name 'life' was already consciousness of life. "The concept is only the interior of nature," says Hegel; and **[2]** already the concept of the living body [*corps vivant*] seemed unthinkable without this internal unity of signification that distinguishes a gesture from a sum of movements. The phenomenon of life appeared at the moment when a piece of extension [*un morceau d'étendue*], by the disposition of its movements and the allusion that each makes to all the others, folded back into itself [*se repliait sur lui-même*], started to express something, and revealed an internal being to the outside. (SC 175/161–62; divisions added)

Remarks in [2] distinguish mere matter ("extension") from meaningful movement ("gesture"). When perceiving life, we do not grasp mere motion but intelligible activity like hunting. The second claim identifies a precondition for life's intelligibility. Animal behaviours "express" an inner ordering principle. Life-activity appears when an organism recursively withdraws, retires, or returns into itself and "constitutes [*se constitue*] its proper milieu" (SC 157/146). The internal counterpart to meaningful behaviour is a recursive self-organizing process: "the organism itself measures the action of things upon it and itself delimits its milieu by a circular process without analogy in the physical world" (SC 161/148). This dialectical or self-referential mode of organization has no merely physical counterpart, but it is perceptually legible.

These claims are consistent with arguments for "acausality" (SC 167/154) and with the view that forms are variously realizable "embodied [*incarnée*] dialectics" (SC 174/161) (see Section 2). But [1] develops these familiar features by claiming that forms are organized by an immanent principle, "concrete totality",

or "unity" of meaning, identified with Hegel's "concept." We perceive organisms' behaviour without constituting it. Moreover, the richness and complexity of qualitative data associated with life is underivable from bare physical conditions; for life, in the relevant sense of a meaningful phenomenon, is not something these conditions could constitute.[30] That living bodies are intelligible to consciousness suggests that vital forms are already ideally structured and fit to be grasped in meaningful terms. The category of the living body is even "unthinkable" without the "internal unity" that Merleau-Ponty likens to Hegel's concept.

Merleau-Ponty is aware that these claims might sound like speculative anthropocentric projections. His response strengthens the idealist tenor of *Structure*'s explanation of life's intelligibility:

> Every theory of 'projection,' either empiricist or intellectualist, assumes what it wants to explain, since we could not project our feelings into the visible behaviour of an animal if something in its behaviour did not itself suggest the inference to us. (SC 169/156)

Perceptual evidence of organization in nature is prior to higher-order theory construction. The structure of life's appearance to consciousness suggests that "the organism itself modifies its milieu according to the inner norm [*norme intérieure*] of its activity" (SC 167/154). Hunting activity discloses an intelligible pattern of movement. Behaviour orients subjects' sense-making: we see 'hunting' or 'prey' because we intend meaningful activity that is not a simple mental conjecture or construct. These intuitive data are "cores [*noyaux*] of meaning [*signification*]" "immanent to the phenomenal organism" (SC 170/157), or "unities of signification that consciousness finds and sees unfolding in [life]" (SC 175/161). Talk of 'norm' or 'idea' points to a sui-generis model of meaning-formation internal to nature: "The signification I find in a sensible whole already inhered within it" (SC 228/211).[31] Organisms' dialectical self-organizing structure supports dynamic interaction with an environment and meaningfully orients consciousness's perceptual sense-making activity.

To counter charges of anthropomorphism, some commentators invoke *Structure*'s transcendental heritage. Muller argues that consciousness effects the "extraction" of ideal unities from organisms: "the very idea that organic behavior is organized around a "norm" internal to the species depends for its empirical support upon the human capacity for perceiving such unities" (2021: 2267).

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30. For similar arguments see SC 140/130, 155–56/143–44, 180–81/166, 189–90/175.

31. See *Structure's* analysis of animal learning: acquiring new behaviours requires "that there is a principle in the organism that ensures learning has a general relevance" (SC 109/96).

While this is a perceptual activity, it need not be limited to us: "There is no reason to think that this character of perception must be limited, in principle, to the human" (2021: 2268). Even if one grants this point, it is important to clarify how Merleau-Ponty understands form's dependence on categorial or perceptual activity (human or otherwise). This dependence is securely epistemological: perceptual meaning-making activity is needed to grasp meaning in form. But *Structure*'s account of life (and perception: see Section 6.2) resists the stronger claim that organic norms or ideas are ontologically (or "empirically") dependent on consciousness.[32] Forms are perceived as intentional objects but subsist independently of meaning-making activity.

One might still think this response begs the question. Merleau-Ponty avers that phenomenology's handling of intuitive evidence affords it a non-circular methodological advantage. While rival approaches study nature under thick theoretical assumptions, phenomenology allows vital forms to first express themselves or appear to consciousness. A prima facie privileging of descriptive methods is justified by the thought that those methods disclose evidence overlooked by alternative approaches. To be sure, intuitive evidence is "neither complete, nor exact" (SC 170/157). The suggestion that intuition is at all relevant for understanding nature is controversial and distinguishes phenomenology from Gestalt or empirical approaches. Still, *that* we encounter a meaningful "concrete totality" in nature is what *Structure* seeks to explain. To accord mere heuristic value to intuitive evidence of intelligible structure in nature itself amounts to anthropomorphism: this assumes that perceptual evidence obtains only for consciousness.

This line of thought becomes more plausible if we recall Merleau-Ponty's nuanced attitude to transcendental thought. As *Structure*'s Part IV shows, the transcendental character of perception or embodiment does not extend, for him, as far as it does for Kant or Husserl. The perspectivism or subject-rela-

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32. Other elements of Muller's interpretation, however, are broadly consistent with that advanced here. She argues that Merleau-Ponty defends a reciprocity between consciousness and nature or world and contends that he acknowledges a "materiality of meaning" within nature (2021: 2272). Unlike most readers of his early work, Muller recognizes that the sense of ideality in *Structure* is not exhausted by that of the "pure idea" (2017: 219). Insofar as it undercuts distinctions between matter and meaning or subject and object, the "Romantic" view of nature she attributes to Merleau-Ponty offers indirect support for the position I advance: both accounts reveal the limits of naturalistic and enactivist interpretations and show that sense inheres in nature. One non-trivial difference between our interpretations concerns how each approach cashes out the metaphysical implications of the view that "the experience of the body" discloses "general structures of being" (2017: 219), and the degree to which it should be seen as their "prototype" (2017: 221). Whereas Muller also acknowledges important links with the post-Kantian tradition and specifically with Herder's treatment of scientific concepts, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty adopts a more robustly idealistic approach to nature and consciousness, which grounds the significance of the lived body on non-subjective conditions.

tivity of embodied consciousness does not entail that the world's appearance derives from or is explainable in terms of the structures of finite embodied subjects. Bodily structures, competencies, or acts are our primary means of navigating the world and of encountering its meaning; but they do not themselves furnish an explanation of its origin. The origins of worldly meaning must be located elsewhere. But if we concede that intuition acquaints us with the real, as Merleau-Ponty maintains, then intuitive data provide a window into the essence of things and not merely into their appearance for consciousness. The meanings evidenced in natural processes and animal behaviour must accordingly be read on their own terms.

Consider a beaver that fells trees and collects sticks and mud in anticipation of the winter. It builds a dam to protect itself from predators, secure a mating environment, and facilitate rearing of kits. With its mate, it digs underwater canals in a prospective dam location. These modifications to the aquatic environment increase the flow of water and food to the dam. Beaver teeth are specially coated for felling trees and grow continuously, which works against the degradation caused by felling trees.

Beaver behaviour suggests an underlying set of intentions and a capacity for meaningful interaction with its environment. Its movements are not haphazard: the trees and sticks it gathers fit the size of the dam; the placement of underwater canals is consistent with the flow of waterways. The beaver's dynamic engagement with the environment reveals intentions of "privileged activity" (SC 168/155). In such cases, it "does not seem possible to understand life by a regressive analysis that returns to [physical] conditions" or laws (SC 173/160). These facts tell us *what* unfolds at one level of life or behaviour but fail to explain *why* it does: they fail to lend life sense or intelligibility. While webbed feet or coated teeth support beaver behaviour, in organic life "equilibrium is obtained, not with respect to real and present conditions, but with respect to only virtual conditions that the system itself brings into existence" (SC 157/145). As encountered by consciousness, life evidences meaningful self-directed activity. Behaviour thereby

> detaches itself from the order of the in itself and becomes the outward projection of a *possibility* internal to the organism. The world, insofar as it contains living beings, ceases to be matter full of juxtaposed parts; it opens up [*se creuse*] at the place where behaviour appears. (SC 136/127)

Unlike explanatory models that privilege mere matter "in itself", *Structure*'s descriptive account of life appeals to "internal" organizing principles that sustain open-ended dynamic activities. Its account of nature-consciousness relations resists a reduction of one term to the other:

the ideal structure of behaviour allows us to link the present state of an organism to an earlier as it was given, and to see in it the progressive real-ization of an essence already legible in the latter, without being able to go beyond the limit or turn the idea into a cause of existence. (SC 173/160; cf. Goldstein 1995: 323–24)

Here essence (like *essence alogique* elsewhere) refers to the internal principle directing an organism and regulating interactions with its environment. Life's "ideal structure" supports descriptive frameworks that invoke, for example, an organism or system's "*raison d'être*" or qualitative reasons that lend a coher-ence to empirical processes (SC 142/131–32). While Goldstein makes ostensibly similar arguments, this account of life's intelligibility presupposes that meaning inheres within nature. The idea is not a product of the imagination and is given to but not constructed by consciousness. A disposition for meaningful self-orga-nization is immanent to nature and perceived vital forms.

6. An Incipient Phenomenological Idealism

Structure's account of life's intelligibility turns on its view that concrete forms bear immanent ideas. As I will now show, what holds for organic forms holds for all forms. Form is an intentional object that is not mere "*appearance* [appar-ence], but a *phenomenon* [phénomène]" (SC 172/159). Phenomena are meaningful wholes structured by an immanent idea or sense that makes them minimally intelligible to consciousness. The view that phenomena are given to mind as articulated prior to discursive or categorial activity holds of diverse intentional objects, including artefacts, organisms, and persons. It betrays two overlooked idealist theses about intentionality and mind-world relations: intentional objects appear as inherently meaningful forms; and intentional forms' meaningful organization is neither contingent on nor a product of consciousness, but has extra-subjective origins. As intended in perception, formal self-organization is autonomous and discloses the intelligible structure of the real.

This idealistic orientation breaks from subject-centric versions that privi-lege the "creative and constructive activities of the mind."[33] Merleau-Ponty affirms that intended objects are meaningfully and mind-independently struc-tured, and construes intelligibility phenomenologically, as the intentional presentation of a sense that discloses a well-ordered world. He develops a phenomenological version of Hegel's views that ideality and conceptual

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33. Descartes, Kant, and Brunschvicg defend this strain of "idealism" and also accept that mind "constructs the objects of science" (PD 249–51).

structure are immanent to reality, and that intelligibility-making conditions do not originate in finite consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's transformation of these tenets, and the synthesis he attempts between transcendental, Gestalt-psychological, and idealist approaches, serve an ambitious attempt "to distinguish mind [*l'intelligence*] from intellectualism [*l'intellectualisme*]" and to forge a novel phenomenological view of reason and intelligibility in perception (SC 135/124).

6.1. Structure's *Generic Account of Form-Constitution*

With Husserl, Merleau-Ponty accepts that three-dimensional perceptual objects are given with a perspectival structure. While I see one side of a desk, there is more to the object than what I immediately grasp. In a single take, we only see partial profiles of extended things. In phenomenological parlance, these objects are 'for me' without being reducible to my intentional stance.

Merleau-Ponty explains this basic feature by appealing to three-dimensional objects' "original structure" (SC 209/194). Their abidingly perspectival character makes "ideal reference" to an "ambiguous mode of organization" (SC 210/195). The salient point is that the incomplete appearance of extended things reflects the form or mode of intentional organization characteristic of three-dimensional objects. Consistent with feature (vi) above, form instantiates its own dynamic or "ambiguous" governing logic, which normatively motivates a specific range of subjective intentional stances. This derives from the object's form and not from consciousness. I can move around the table, look at it from above, get underneath it, etc.; but my application of my perceptual skills is governed by the phenomenon that appears before me. Consciousness "cannot but understand" "phenomena" "as a dialectic", or as dynamic, organized, meaningful wholes (SC S221/205).

Intuitive evidence thereby reveals a deeper sense to the in itself (*l'en soi*). A perceived object is "indivisibly seized as an 'in itself' [*en soi*], as endowed [*doué*] with an interior that I could never stop exploring" (SC 201/186). As in the account of life's intelligibility (Section 5), my perspectival stances and their "concordant multiplicity" are guided by the object's form, which "organizes itself from itself" (*s'organise d'elle-même*) in perception (SC 202/187). The term 'in itself' refers to a principle structuring objects' concrete phenomenal appearance, which affords meaningful possibilities of perceptual engagement.

In addition to resisting psychologistic subordinations of form to contingent features of human consciousness, and realistic or causal theories of perception, the view that intentional objects' perceived structure is ideal serves *Structure*'s fundamental goal of integrating consciousness with the real:

> Far from introducing a coefficient of subjectivity into perception, it instead gives perception the assurance that it communicates with a world richer than what we know of it, that is, with a real world [*un monde réel*]. The profiles of my desk are not given to first-hand knowledge [*à la connaissance directe*] as appearances [*des apparences*] without value, but as 'manifestations' [«*manifestations*»] of it. (SC 201/186)

That perceivers are guided by intended objects' form explains why an object can be "for me" without being reducible to my judgmental or synthetic activity. Recall that Merleau-Ponty also uses the term 'idea' to capture concrete, mind-independent features of nature or perception. The view that perceptual consciousness encounters intelligible structure supports the conclusion that the intentional "relation is original and founds a consciousness of reality in a specific manner", namely, one that presupposes the subjective standpoint without being reducible to it (SC 202/187).[34]

These remarks shift the constitutive burden from consciousness to objects and conditions "proper to the phenomenal field [. . .] [or] the perceived field itself" (SC 221/205).[35] They demonstrate that "sensible phenomena" "are actualized in my field of consciousness" by worldly and not solely subjective conditions (SC 234/217). While "perceptual experience is constituting with respect to this world", 'experience' includes subject and object-terms and field-characteristics (the visual background, the non-perceived, etc.) (SC 235/219). Perceptual constitution is an intentional complex governed by conditions that subjects access and engage but do not engineer: "We find ourselves in the presence of a perceptual field lived prior to number, measure, space, and causality, which is only ever given as a perspectival view on objects endowed [*doués*] with stable properties" (SC 235–36/219).

Structure's final programmatic section neatly summarizes how this model of form informs its account of perception and subject-world relations:

> the experience of a real thing cannot be explained by the action of that thing on my mind [*esprit*]: the only way for a thing to act on a mind is to offer it a meaning [*sens*], to manifest itself to it [*se manifester à lui*], to constitute itself before [*se constituer devant*] the mind's intelligible structures [*articulations*]. The analysis of the act of knowing leads to the idea of a constituting or naturing [*naturante*] thought which internally subtends [*sous-tend intérieurement*] the characteristic structure of objects. To mark

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34. Geraets concludes that Merleau-Ponty denies that ideality is present in the concrete, but overlooks an alternative interpretation of the idea, on which it is not abstract, eternal, or a product of consciousness, but coextensive with perceived structure (1971: 115–18).

35. See similar accounts of hallucinations and nerve function (SC 221–22/206).

> at once the intimacy of objects to the subject and the presence in them of solid structures distinct from mere appearances, one will call them 'phenomena' [*des «phénomènes»*], and philosophy, insofar as it adheres to this theme, becomes phenomenology, that is, an inventory of consciousness [*de la conscience*] as milieu of the universe. (SC 215/199)

Any perceived object is concretely grasped as an organized core of meaning (SC 233/216). Intentional meanings are not sense data or impressions causally affecting the brain. They are phenomena, or articulated wholes subject to plural modes of appearance and description. This basic assumption licenses transcendental idealism's methodological "conversion of the gaze [*du regard*]": the view that subjectivity and objectivity are essentially correlated (SC 239/199, 240/223).

While necessary, this commitment proves insufficient. To detail consciousness-nature relations, integrate consciousness with *le réel*, and resist subordinating one to the other, one must concede that phenomena themselves constitute their intended structure. Use of the pronominal form ('*se constituer*') suggests that constitution unfolds within the phenomenal field, without being the accomplishment of perceivers. Intuition evidences the "auto-distribution" of form in matter, life, and mind (SC 54/51). Form "constitutes, alters and reorganizes itself before us [*se constitue, s'altère ou se réorganise devant nous*]" (SC 241/224).[36] The analysis of life, or the foregrounding of perceived shapes against backgrounds, offer examples of auto-constitution.

Merleau-Ponty's critique of transcendental and realist approaches supports this conclusion and leads him to liken forms or phenomena to ideas. If consciousness knows reality through intentionality, and if intentional objects appear as already-constituted wholes, then (given the limitations of alternative proposals) a disposition for auto-organization must be a real feature of perceived objects and perceptual fields. But because intentional content is meaningful, intentional self-organization is no physical process:

> each formation [*mise en forme*] appears to us on the contrary as an event in the world of ideas, the institution [*l'institution*] of a new dialectic, the opening of a new region of phenomena, [and] the establishment of a new constitutive layer that cancels the preceding one as isolated moment, while conserving and integrating it. (SC 224/208)

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36. Cf. Taminiaux's transcendental proposal (1978: 38–39), partly motivated by remarks describing consciousness as "condition of possibility and . . . foundation" for perception (SC 218/202). Consciousness is undoubtedly a condition for sense-making, but not for sense or form as such (SC 11/13, 40/40, 144–45/134).

A core virtue of a theory of form qua synthesis of ideality and concreteness is its ability to explain perceptual structure without reducing it to mind (intellectualism) or matter (realism), thereby meeting a basic goal of Merleau-Ponty's early thought. This motivates a hybrid approach that joins intuitive descriptions with extra-transcendental metaphysical tenets. Perceived forms are intelligible thanks to their self-organizing structure, which gives sense to perceptual exploration. Ideal and real are not contradictories: the structure of intentionality shows that ideality really obtains in perceived objects and in the world.

One might wonder how this proposal squares with *Structure's* apparent denials that form and its cognates are ideas or otherwise ideal. For example, Merleau-Ponty holds that "behaviour is not a thing, nor is it an idea" (SC 138/127). In the football example, he denies that the field supporting players' activities, whose functional role he likens to that of form, is an "ideal term" (SC 183/168). *Structure's* final section stresses the need to distinguish between "ideal *signification*" and "actual *structure*" (SC 238/221).

While these and similar claims ostensibly challenge the view that form could be ideal, their significance becomes clearer if we draw an important distinction. On one interpretation, ideas are abstract immaterial entities. This interpretation could cohere with a Platonic view on which universals are metaphysically independent from their instances; with a Cartesian innate idea; or even a view of ideality sometimes articulated by Husserl, on which ideal content is unchanging or timeless. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty sometimes uses the term 'idea' to refer to conceptual, logical, linguistic, and propositional meaning that remains relatively separate from empirical conditions, a usage often (but not always) signalled by the term '*signification*.'

This latter interpretation figures in the three cases above. The first claim denies that the meaning of behaviour is solely that of an abstract idea or a signification, that is, something in the head.[37] In the football case, Merleau-Ponty is concerned to deny that form retains a strict identity across its instances, as a concept might (form's constitutive structure is constant, but the terms of its relations change). Finally, sense in structure fails to match a view that defines meaning exclusively as abstract *signification*.

As evidence suggests, a different interpretation of the idea is possible. On this reading, ideas do not refer to "relations [. . .] intrinsic to thought" alone (SC 138/127). As analyses of life and perception demonstrate, there is reason to accord an internal unity of meaning to perceived objects and organisms. Meaning in these objects is not of the linguistic, logical, or abstract-conceptual order. Merleau-Ponty describes it using the term '*sens*,' which refers to perceptually

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37. For an alternative interpretation that argues for the separation of form and idea, see Sheredos (2017: 201, 209).

accessible, embodied, and embedded meaning. Consciousness is not a mere "fabric" of significations, and perceptual intentionality is specially positioned to grasp a different kind of meaningful unity (SC 232/215). Unlike on the interpretation above, sense accords with a reading of idea on which meaning is generated within perception itself and resists any essential contrast with concreteness. Sensible unities like forms, behaviour, or phenomena are distinguished by their auto-constitutive mode of intentional organization, which mirrors that of an idea in the second sense (see the description in Section 5.2). Ideas in this sense yield a form of unity exemplified by perceived wholes, one unlike that borne by objects of *signification*.

6.2. Form, Consciousness, and Nature

Structure meets its basic desiderata by deploying a novel theory of form fit to capture the phenomenal structure of a diverse range of intended objects. Its implications for phenomenology run deep and require recalibrated accounts of consciousness, nature, and constitution.

Despite recognizing a significant role for the mind's "intelligible articulations," Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of transcendental models of mental activity lead him to limit the reach of subjective constitution. With Kant, he accepts that recourse to the reflective stance (the 'I think') is a precondition for phenomenological description (SC 239/222). However, constitution is best understood as disclosive rather than constructive or creative.[38] Reflection presupposes prior contact with the "structure of objects" it "subtends." Consciousness must first encounter "a whole and its immanent law" in perceptual objects (SC 70/65). Knowledge of the perceived world "always" requires that perceivers "seize some given [*un donné*] in a certain function, under a certain relation, 'insofar as' it signifies or presents to me this or that structure" (SC 213–14/198). Consciousness tracks a "*constitutive history*" that precedes its own meaning-making activity (SC 224/208).

To be sure, the claim that constitution is a productive or "naturing" activity partly picks out its active modalities: by detailing perceived structures, descriptions contribute something new to their original meaning.[39] But it also suggests that constitutive activity extends meaning-forming processes already unfolding in nature: perceptual consciousness is also "natured consciousness" (*la conscience*

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38. While Merleau-Ponty sometimes identifies 'constitution' with 'intellectualism,' this does not capture Husserl's full intentions. See Bachelard's suggestion that constitution is no mere "*creation* of beings" (1990: 161).

39. Merleau-Ponty will sometimes use this term as shorthand for 'intellectualist' views of constitution (PhP 17/lxx).

naturée) (SC 216/200). Consciousness is "a part of the world, since it can be integrated into the relations that constitute it" (SC 216/200). To grasp and describe phenomena, "the soul [must] remain coextensive with nature" (SC 203/189).

Crucially, this view of "nature" is not that of empirical science or classical transcendental thought. While Merleau-Ponty concedes that the phenomenological reduction sustains a non-scientistic view of nature, he takes issue with Husserl's (and Kant's) separation of consciousness from nature. He aims to rectify transcendental philosophy's inability to explain "sensible consciousness", namely, mind qua situated within nature or the real, by developing a novel philosophy of nature consistent with his view of form (SC 217/201). Not unlike their empiricist or realist rivals, Kant and Husserl define nature either as an object constituted by mind or as a deterministic material system ontologically dissimilar to consciousness.[40] They save constitutive activity from material reduction but motivate the untoward (for Merleau-Ponty) conclusion that meaning obtains only for mind.

Structure does not ultimately develop its revisionary philosophy of nature in adequate detail; and the text's final recourse to perceptual consciousness does not exclude a reading on which nature is meaningful for consciousness alone.[41] Nevertheless, if its other claims are to go through, nature must bear self-organizing forms that do not obtain (on pain of anthropomorphism) solely for consciousness. The suggestion that consciousness is "bearer of a dialectic" of meaningful forms presupposes that nature is permeated by ideal conditions (SC 220/204). Consciousness does not inhere in deterministic "material apparatuses" but is the most sophisticated node in successive "dialectical stages" of meaning-formation (SC 224/208).

One might question the tenability of marrying these claims with the subset of commitments that Merleau-Ponty inherits from Kant and Husserl. His stance might invite confusion about the degree to which form depends on consciousness: qua immanent perceptual object, it seems to obtain for consciousness; qua self-organizing idea, it appears to transcend it.

As I have tried to show, for Merleau-Ponty these alternatives are not mutually exclusive. A phenomenology of perception shows that form's sense does not originate in a sphere immanent to consciousness, even if it obtains for perceivers. Form's ontological independence from our constitutive activity is phenomenologically substantiated: the intentional presentation of sense allows the structure of the real to permeate the first-person. But this structure is not itself something subjective, even if perceivers need it to make sense of experience. This view attempts

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40. Realism mistakenly "inserts perception into nature" by defining nature as a causal system governing consciousness (SC 208/193).

41. This anticipates the later view that nature "has a meaning without [. . .] being posited by thought" (N 19/3); see also Muller (2021: 2272–73, 2257–58).

to reconcile alternatives between the 'in itself' (the world absent conscious activity) and 'for itself' (the world as perceived) by further developing the sort of intentional structure that Husserl describes as a transcendence in immanence.

While *Structure*'s Conclusion suggests a fidelity to transcendental consciousness "realized in existence", this view is transcendental only in an attenuated sense (SC 238/221). To resolve the "problem of perception", phenomenology must embrace non-transcendental views of form, nature, and mental life (SC 240/224). This approach to mind-world relations presupposes a view of form-constitution unlike that of "critical philosophy" (SC 224/208). It requires an acceptance of form's amphibious intentional and metaphysical status. Form "is neither thing nor consciousness" (SC 138/127) but a "meaningful whole" that is neither "material reality nor [. . .] a mental reality": it "belongs neither to the external world nor to internal life" (SC 197/182). Like soul and body, consciousness and nature

> can never be distinguished absolutely without ceasing to be; their empirical connection is founded [*donc fondée*] on the originary operation [*l'opération originaire*] that installs meaning [*sens*] in a fragment of matter, and leads it to dwell [*fait habiter*], appear, and exist there. By returning to this *structure* as fundamental reality, we render both the distinction and the union of the soul and body comprehensible. (SC 226/209)

Structure unfailing likens this "originary" constitutive condition to an ideal, immanent, auto-organizational process. In nature and perception, "structuration unfolds [*le structuration se fait*] according to novel dimensions" that transcendental, Gestalt, and naturalistic models fail to adequately appreciate (SC 208/193, 199/184).

7. Conclusion

I have argued that *Structure*'s positive account of consciousness-nature relations presupposes a view of form qua self-organizing idea. This commitment promises to explain the structure of perceptual experience without replicating the errors of rival views. An incipient view of nature as intelligibly structured serves Merleau-Ponty's ambitious goal of putting reason back in the world. To conclude, I would like to consider some wider implications.

(1) *Structure*'s goal of integrating intentional analysis with the real and its appeal to the idea demonstrate that a strong interest in metaphysics is prominent in Merleau-Ponty's early thought. The relative ease with which he supplements intentional analyses with metaphysical theses challenges interpretations

on which metaphysical concerns are a novel or distinguishing characteristic of his later writings.[42] This suggests the need to reconsider a relatively standard periodization used to explain Merleau-Ponty's philosophical development. It also raises the question of what relation these arguments bear to his other major works. While I can only offer a sketch here, three points of continuity can be noted.

First, as *Phénoménologie de la perception*'s analyses show, *Structure*'s interpretation of form-constitution is developed and expanded to accommodate a wider range of cases.[43] The auto-constitutive model promises to explain a variety of synthetic and constitutive process unfolding in space and time, within and outside the perceiving subject. To take one important case, the foundational concept of the phenomenal field, or the meaning-giving framework that makes perceptual experience possible, is ordered according to the self-regulating logic that *Structure* accords to form.

Second, from *Phénoménologie* onwards, the philosophical significance accorded to nature progressively increases. Merleau-Ponty's analyses of perception increasingly appeal to nature and cognate terms to describe the synthesis native to the phenomenal field and the body schema. This partly signals an attempt to further weaken the transcendental-empirical divide. It also reveals an attempt to develop an earlier line of argument that construes nature as meaningful in itself and endowed with a meaning-producing capacity, one announced most immediately in perception (PhP 346–47/307, 371/329, 384/342). Merleau-Ponty will ultimately associate the logic of organic meaning-formation first articulated in *Structure* with an 'ancient' view of nature as productivity or creation of meaning. Intervening research in the mid-1950s develops the concept of 'primordial nature' by establishing new links between it and the domains of history, social life, and culture. This leads to the conclusion that "nature" is intertwined with "spirit," a link only gestured to in *Structure*'s discussions of work and the human capacity to transform nature through symbol, concept, or language (RC 20–21). Through critical engagement with thinkers who offer variants of this position, including Schelling, Marx, and Husserl, Merleau-Ponty will claim that his version does not reduce nature to spirit or vice versa, but instead testifies to their inseparability.

This suggests a third point of continuity. In subsequent writings, the implications of the view that perception acquaints us with the world's intelligible structure are increasingly deepened. Merleau-Ponty's sustained attempts to weaken the barrier between idea and matter lead him to conclude that ideas and their distinc-

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42. Cf. Kwant (1966). Dillon's more nuanced interpretation locates latent ontological implications in Merleau-Ponty's use of Gestalt psychology (1988: 80–81). The implicit/explicit dichotomy that guides his account suggests a developmental narrative on which post-*Phénoménologie* writings become progressively ontological.

43. For the self-organizing quality of perceived forms see PhP 133/164, 127/158, 129/160, 404–6/444–46; see also PhP 61–62/87–89 for their organic non-law-like structure.

tive constitutive structure enjoy a wider purchase. Perhaps most strikingly, this is evidenced in the claim that "ideality" (or the invisible) is coextensive with the visible sphere, or, that ideal and concrete conditions jointly secure the intelligibility of experience (VI 197/152). In addition to the case of nature identified above, another example of this tendency includes Merleau-Ponty's reformulation of Husserl's concept of institution, which aims to explain how impersonal or sedimented ideal domains like language or culture mutate over time and secure the intelligibility of the lived world. These developments suggest that Merleau-Ponty devotes significant energy to reformulating his early accounts of world, nature, and consciousness, while maintaining and in some cases expanding their idealist tenor.

(2) As this suggests, within the phenomenological tradition, *Structure's* reading of form and nature occupies novel metaphysical ground. While Merleau-Ponty professes a fidelity to the transcendental tradition, his definitions of consciousness and nature stand in a relation of "simple homonymy" to it (SC 222–23/206). This interpretation clarifies his ambivalent attitude. He adopts core transcendental positions (the co-referentiality of subjectivity and objectivity; the irreducibility of perceptual activity) but resists the mind-nature cleavage accepted by Kant and retained in Husserl. Both locate sensible consciousness within material nature while recognizing the autonomy of mental activity (SC 216/200, 240–41/224). But even if Husserl goes further than Kant when defending a continuity between constitution and the lifeworld, it is still crucial for him to maintain a separation in kind between constitution and the pre-scientific realm of nature or physical things.

Merleau-Ponty's hesitations about the thesis that synthetic activity alone produces form reflect a broader attempt to recast the relations of priority between nature and mind (SC 232/215). Not unlike Hegel, he sees ideality as indispensable to nature and finite objects (Hegel 1991b: §95). While he flags some conceptual links to Hegel, his interpretation of this connection is distinguished by its emphasis on form's perceptual character. As I argued, Merleau-Ponty arrives at this conclusion through a decidedly phenomenological avenue: form's ideal character follows from observations about the givenness of objects in matter, life, and mind, and from an apagogical argument against the view that either consciousness or matter could constitute their intended structure.

This argument has a transcendental ring to it: a condition of possibility is invoked to explain facts about experience. Beyond basic similarities, however, form's metaphysical and intentional characteristics place it outside Kant's or Husserl's transcendental idealist frameworks. From a phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty denies that nature is a systematic totality of deterministic causes, the object of the natural sciences, or a non-naturalistic sense animated by subjective performances. In this early text, he describes nature in dynamic and meaningful terms, and as mind-like but not mind-formed. His appeals

to extra-subjective or transcendent conditions to explain intentional structure assume that form has an "existence grounded in itself," which places it beyond the transcendental boundaries recognized by Kant (A491/B519). And unlike for Husserl or Gurwitsch, for whom ideality is a necessary component of intentionality, Merleau-Ponty does not construe ideality as an identity of meaning recoverable by consciousness. More fundamentally, he denies Husserl's claim that every "imaginable sense, every imaginable being, . . . falls within the domain of transcendental subjectivity" (Hua 1:116; Hua 6:70). The attribution of auto-constitutive features to form breaks with Husserl's core transcendental-idealist position that there is a viable account of meaning-formation that is not a subjective accomplishment in some modality (individual, intersubjective, or historical).[44] *Structure*'s revisionary approach to constitution suggests that foundational phenomenological goals will profit from integrating Hegelian theoretical resources, provided they are sufficiently reformed for use in intentional analysis.

(3) That Merleau-Ponty's early approach to mind, nature, and constitution converges with post-Kantian currents motivates a reevaluation of the extent to which *Structure* serves the project of naturalizing phenomenology. While there are multiple strains, proponents of phenomenological naturalization deny mind-body dualism and profess a fidelity to scientific findings (Petitot, Varela, Pachoud, & Roy 1999). They seek to close the gaps between consciousness and nature and between phenomenology's descriptive-transcendental orientation and the explanatory methods of natural science. In a recent Merleau-Ponty-inspired iteration, Reynolds (2017) contends that phenomenology is compatible with a weak form of methodological naturalism, on which scientific results can put pressure on phenomenological descriptions (even modifying or harmonizing the latter with the former), and with liberal naturalism, which rejects the ontological boundaries of scientific naturalism. This proposal welcomes a continuity between empirical findings and transcendental descriptions and sees phenomenology and naturalism as bedfellows.

Thompson's *Mind in Life* develops one of the more powerful interpretations of phenomenological naturalism to date and offers a naturalistic interpretation of *Structure*'s view of form. On his proposal, living forms are not identical to but "ontologically emergent with respect to mere physical structures" (Thompson 2007: 75). Organic form is emergent because its self-organizing circular relations are qualitative transformations of lower-level physical conditions. Organic and perceptual processes cannot be localized solely in physical conditions like brain states, where these are thought to exclude meaning or consciousness (2007: 71). Characteristics like interiority, selfhood, and meaning, typically attributed to consciousness, already inhere in life.

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44. For Husserl, Gestalt views of organization reflect a naturalistic prejudice (Hua 1:77).

By attributing mind-like features to life, Thompson redefines nature according to principles of organizational closure. Unlike the reductive accounts *Structure* rejects, he holds that identity, selfhood, and organic sense-making processes in nature can be studied by sufficiently refined, phenomenologically-informed empirical methods (2007: 146, 238). By anticipating developments in autopoietic interpretations of life and cognition, *Structure* helps us understand how auto-constitutive material processes generate higher-order forms in organic life (2007: 74) and offers a model of "organizational closure, in which processes recursively depend on each other for their own generation and realization, and constitute a system as a unity" (2007: 67).

This innovative reading captures many of *Structure*'s intuitions. Thompson plausibly observes that Merleau-Ponty's critiques of causal realism and naturalism undermine "objectivism," the view that accounts of subjectivity, nature, or world can invoke empirical facts alone (2007: 86). He suggests that Merleau-Ponty's residual anti-naturalistic claims (e.g., that form is exclusively perceptual) are motivated by an inability to foresee developments (e.g., in morphodynamics and topology) that couple neural explanation with models broadly consistent with a philosophy of perception. If descriptive methods also shed light on life, they need not obtain solely for perceptual consciousness (2007: 85). Accordingly, "the kind of phenomenological antinaturalism espoused [by phenomenology] has been outstripped by science (in a way not unlike the way autopoietic biology has outstripped the limits of reason as Kant saw them in relation to the organism and self-organization)" (2007: 357).

Structure's rejection of mind-body dualism, its serious engagement with empirical literature, and its rejection of reductive views of nature lead Reynolds, Thompson, and naturalistically-inclined phenomenologists to see it as a theoretical ally.[45] However, the interpretation on offer suggests that these commitments are a minimal and not a sufficient set of conditions needed to enlist *Structure* in naturalizing projects. As Thompson observes, "the very idea of nature" is at stake in these projects (2007: 359).[46] Phenomenological naturalization raises foundational questions about what nature is.

On my reconstruction, *Structure* proposes that nature is constituted by self-organizing ideas or forms, whose auto-constitutive structure is without material analogue. This definition stymies attempts to assimilate *Structure* to orthodox naturalizing projects, which accept more restricted readings of nature and naturalization.[47] Merleau-Ponty does not benchmark his definition of nature to empirical findings (even if qualitatively reinterpreted) or recognize consistency with empiri-

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45. See Reynolds (2017) and Gallagher (2018: 134).

46. See Stroud (1996: 52–54) for an earlier observation along these lines.

47. Like Reynolds, Kee (2020) argues that Merleau-Ponty follows a 'liberal' approach, adopts empirical findings, and couples them with his own phenomenological descriptions. While rightly noting the importance of defining nature for naturalization projects, he does not explore the idealist dimensions of nature in *Structure*.

cal research as a theoretical constraint. Although he is nowise interested in falsifying empirical science, he formulates a non-scientific, non-empirical view of nature from the first-person, which draws on premises orthogonal to orthodox naturalistic frameworks. His view of nature makes room for consciousness but locates nature-consciousness continuity already at the level of meaning and ideality.

As Thompson and others demonstrate, unorthodox phenomenological naturalisms are also viable. Still, as some commentators have recently conceded, Merleau-Ponty's view of nature is assimilable to revisionary emergentist frameworks only if nature is radically reinterpreted (Gallagher 2017: 130). Enactivist attributions of auto-organizational, mind-like features to life break with classical views of nature but still assume that forms are measurable and representable by sufficiently refined empirical models: for these features, like emergentist views of nature, are ultimately material (Reynolds 2020). As Gallagher suggests, in line with Thompson's enlarged or enriched interpretation, enactivism might also recommend a more revisionary philosophy of nature that redraws boundaries between the mental and physical and accepts an inclusive view of organism-environment-mind relations (Gallagher 2017: 126, 130). While Merleau-Ponty is committed to the project of reinterpreting nature, he does so not only through critical engagement with contemporary science but also by means of an independent, incipient idealist reading of nature, whose method and metaphysics diverges in key respects from unorthodox naturalistic approaches. If the contested interpretive points above are granted, fully integrating this construal of nature-consciousness relations into unorthodox naturalism requires admitting idealist tenets that will likely stretch naturalization beyond its recognizable and (for its proponents) defensible metaphysical boundaries, namely, those of naturalized transcendentalism or liberal naturalism (Thompson 2007: 82). Alternatively, revisionary naturalists might defend naturalistic-friendly readings of *Structure*'s metaphysics of mind and nature and its methodological aims in using psychological studies. While often plausible in themselves, this interpretation shows that these readings will remain hermeneutically underdetermined and necessarily encounter significant textual obstacles.

That this dilemma arises at all suggests that *Structure* is animated by core concerns outside the naturalistic research program (despite the tenability of a Merleau-Ponty-inspired naturalism). While it productively informs enactivist and emergentist models, consigning it to a naturalistic framework will mask its ambitious attempt to advance a radical phenomenological reinterpretation of nature and consciousness. An ostensibly dogmatic aversion to describing material processes in qualitative terms marks the start of a lifelong attempt to overcome the mind/nature divide in ways that classical transcendental philosophy (in Merleau-Ponty's eyes) could not countenance. This motivates an interpretation of form, consciousness, and nature that "is the philosophical truth of naturalism and realism", and shows *Structure* to be an unlikely heir to *Naturphilosophie* (SC 241/224).

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

Hua 1 = Husserl, Edmund (1950). *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge* (Stephen Strasser, Ed.) Martinus Nijhoff. / (1999) *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Dorion Cairns, Trans.). Kluwer.

Hua 6 = Husserl, Edmund (1976). *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendentale Phänomenologie: Ein Einleitung in die Phänomenologische Philosophie* (3rd ed.). Walter Biemel (Ed.). Martinus Nijhoff. / (1970) *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Transcendental Phenomenology* (David Carr, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.

A/B = Kant, Immanuel (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason* (Allen W. Wood and Paul Guyer, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

5: xx = Kant, Immanuel (2000). *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Eric Matthews and Paul Guyer, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

N = Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1995). *La nature: Notes, Cours au Collège de France.* (Dominique Séglard, Ed.). Seuil.

PD = Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (2001). *Parcours Deux (1951–1961).* Verdier.

PhP = Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (2005). *Phénoménologie de la perception.* Gallimard. / (2012) *Phenomenology of Perception* (Donald A. Landes, Trans.) Routledge.

PrP = Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1964). *The Primacy of Perception* (James M. Edie, Ed.). Northwestern University Press.

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